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SUBJECT: MALIKI SCORES BIG AT APRIL 5 PCNS MEETING

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

11. (C) According to an ISCI representative, the April 5 meeting of the Political Committee for National Security (PCNS), a body comprised of representatives of all political blocs, was attended by President Talabani; Prime Minister Maliki; Deputy PM Barham Saleh; Vice Presidents Adel Abdel Mehdi and Tareq al-Hashemi; Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari; CoR Speaker Mahmoud Mashadani and his deputies Khalid Attiyah and Arif Tayfour; and representatives of all main CoR blocs. Of particular significance, the Sadrists ended its boycott of recent PCNS meetings by sending Trend CoR bloc leader Nisar al-Rubaie and another official. The meeting produced a 15-point statement (text reported septel) that gave a big boost to Maliki's recent get-tough posture on armed groups with a public affirmation that the PCNS "stands firmly with the government and its various security agencies in confronting and deterring the militias and outlaws, regardless of their affiliation, and respects the role that was played by the armed forces to impose security and order in Basrah and other governorates."

12. (C) In April 6 read-out conversations with USG officials, DPM Barham was effusive in his praise of Maliki's performance at the meeting and FM Zebari gushed that he had never seen the political blocs so united. In April 6 read-out conversations with USG officials, DPM Barham was effusive in his praise of Maliki's performance at the meeting (calling it "brilliant") and FM Zebari gushed that he had never seen the political blocs so united. Vice President Hashemi said the session was "historic" and noted that for the first time the entire government was united on critical issues; the only division was within the UIA, and the Sadrists were isolated (adding that he offered after the session to mediate between Muqtada Sadr and other leaders within the UIA). Speaker Mashadani proclaimed: "This was the most successful PCNS meeting I ever attended," then clarified -- "it was the only successful PCNS meeting I ever attended."

ISCI Notes Reveal Anti-Sadrists Atmosphere

13. (C) According to internal ISCI notes of the meeting given to us by an ISCI representative, meeting attendees were broadly united against the Sadrists. The ISCI document provides a flavor of the anti-Sadrists tone of the meeting. For example, Kurdish representative Fuad Masoum asked that, if Muqtada al-Sadr is the leader of a political trend, "why does he not want to come and sit and join us?" Estranged Dawa Party CoR member Falih al-Fayadh tried briefly to challenge the consensus opinion against the Sadrists but was quickly overruled. The Sadrists offered several "excuses" for their conduct, including a fear of GOI retaliation and their right to act in self-defense, and then asked why only the Sadr Trend was being asked to solve the problem of militias. Maliki's "well-prepared and organized" response allegedly "silenced" the Sadrists. ISCI representative Sheikh Jalal al-Din al-Saghir responded calmly to a charge

from Fadhila's Basim Sharif that he was "inflaming" the situation, but then harshly criticized the Sadrists and said that, according to his information, the Sadrists were cooperating with the forces "they call an occupation." "If it is true, then release it," Sadrist Trend CoR bloc leader Nisar al-Rubaie retorted. Near the end of the meeting, Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi asked the Sadrists if, given the unified position against them, they were willing to change their stance: after they answered in the negative, Maliki noted wryly, "it,s not in their hands, naturally."

Observations of an Accused Mischief-Maker

¶4. (C) An ISCI source confided to us that Falih al-Fayadh played the role of troublemaker who carried water for the Sadrist Trend at the meeting. For his part, Falih told us April 6 that he attended the meeting not as a Dawa Party member but as the personal representative of his mentor, former PM Ibrahim al-Jaffri, who is currently in Tehran (Falih, who said he will travel to Iran tomorrow to join his mentor Jaffri, claimed the purpose of the trip is to express concern to Iranian government officials about Iranian interference in Iraq). Falih asserted that he and Sadrist Trend CoR bloc leader Nisar al-Rubaie sought to have a "real discussion about the facts" regarding the GOI "Operation Charge of the Horsemen" in Basrah but were shouted down by the rest of the group. He recounted particularly sharp and heated exchanges with Badr strongman Hadi al-Amri, particularly when he and Nisar demanded that focus on armed groups include all such groups (read Badr) and not just the Jaysh al-Mahdi. In the end, he said he expressed strong reservations about the text of the PCNS statement but was unable to block it. He characterized the Basrah operation as

BAGHDAD 00001065 002 OF 002

an utter failure that weakened Maliki and the GOI security forces. While political bloc leaders are putting on a public face of support for Maliki, he blurted, behind his back they are highly critical. Although he is as critical as any, Falih (who is rumored to be a viable candidate to replace Maliki) said he would not now back a no-confidence move against the PM because Iraq has been badly shaken in recent days and simply cannot withstand any additional turbulence at this time.

¶5. (C) While Maliki is weaker after the Basrah offensive, Falih asserted, Muqtada al-Sadr emerged stronger - and with his movement more united - than prior to the operation. He said events in Basrah proved the Sadrist Trend "still has teeth" and is a cohesive movement. He said the Trend is feeling its strength and will seek to press the advantage with a large "anti-occupation" demonstration on Wednesday April 9, which he predicted would draw a huge crowd. He replied to our question about Iran's role in the matter by muttering that it was a sad day for Iraq when negotiations to end fighting in Basrah were held in Tehran and not Najaf. Falih said the issue of a long-term USG-GOI strategic relationship was on the PCNS agenda but was not discussed since the topic of Basrah took up nearly the entire meeting.

Sadrist Retort

¶6. (U) In an April 6 media statement, Sadrist Trend CoR bloc leader Rubaie criticized the PCNS statement and said the Sadr trend "strongly rejects" the statement's point regarding support for the GOI stance against militias, and the statement's call for "all parties and political entities to disband its militias." He criticized the use of the word "militia" as "vague," adding that "it will be interpreted according to the interests of the political parties." In a press conference following release of the statement, Talabani admitted that the Sadrists expressed reservations on the points but said they "agreed on the general framework and to control security and impose law and order in the country."

Fadhila Party Readout

17. (C) Dr. Basim Sharif told us he had represented the Fadhila bloc at the PCNS meeting. Recounting the meeting, Dr. Basim said that the PM spent nearly three hours on the issue of Jaysh al-Mahdi and how the GOI should confront them. He also believes that the PM remains resolute in his desire to go after JAM, and that renewed conflict between the GOI and JAM appeared extremely likely. Discussing Fadhila's participation in the meeting, he stated he had emphasized the need for political reform, as well as the need to reform the ISF and IP into more professional forces to ensure that their members, loyalties were with the state and not individual sects, militias, and political organizations. He seemed extremely pleased that the first point of the statement issued by the PCNS came from Fadhila. In a shift from Fadhila's recent anti-Maliki rhetoric, Dr. Basim indicated that though Fadhila would like to see a political solution, they supported the GOI and understood the threat that militias posed to the primacy of the central government. He added that Fadhila's main concern about any future operations is mostly humanitarian, expressing his fear that any future incursions into Sadr City or Basrah could result in a large number of civilian casualties and lead to a humanitarian crisis.

Comment

18. (C) Maliki could hardly have asked for a more positive and public affirmation of political unity and support for his security crackdown than the April 5 PCNS statement. The best evidence of his current strength can be found in the stance of his many political nemeses: VP Tareq al-Hashemi has made all the right noises about support for the PM; estranged elements from Maliki's Dawa Party like Jaffri and Falih have no appetite to take him on under current circumstances; over the last two weeks, Fadhila has completely reversed course, moving from unbridled criticism and nearly joining the Sadrists in a no-confidence vote against the PM to professed agreement with Maliki's crackdown on the Sadrists; and even UIA dissident Qassim Daoud is loathe to jump on a no-confidence motion. That leaves the Sadrist Trend alone in the Iraqi political wilderness, a familiar haunt for them and one in which they appear comfortable, and the place where many observers say the Sadrists are most dangerous and unpredictable. Their next big opportunity to express their feelings about Maliki (and the U.S.) will come on Wednesday April 9, the day of their planned "million man march" through the streets of Baghdad.

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